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ABSTRACT

In 1988, as part of the Education Reform Act, the United Kingdom government allowed schools to opt out of local education authorities (LEA) and become grant-maintained (GM) schools, funded directly by the government. It was contended that the program would diversify education, free schools from local bureaucracies, and, consequently, make schools more responsive to parents. About 990 schools have opted out of the LEA format, which is a small percentage of British schools eligible. The program has followed a trend in public management to foster autonomous institutions with devolved management structures, light central administration, greater managerial efficiency, lower costs, and greater consumer pressure. A study of students and parents at eight GM schools and two LEA schools sought to determine attitudes and perceptions of school performance. Early perceptions and experiences of the GM schools policy indicate that opting out has had little significant impact on the choices parents and pupils make about schools or their experience of state education. GM status is not having a significant impact on patterns of school choice. However, conjuncture of GM status and selective schooling alters the ability of parents to pick their schools. (Contains 26 references.) (JPT)

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MARKETS AND SELF-GOVERNING SCHOOLS THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1988, as part of the Education Reform Act, the UK government legislated to enable schools to opt out of local education authorities (LEAs) and become grant-maintained (GM) schools, funded directly by central government. The policy was justified on the grounds that GM schools would further diversify educational provision, free schools from the presumed strictures of local bureaucracies, and thus make them more responsive to parents.

Schools are now able to leave the control of LEAs after a ballot of parents and after their application for GM status has been approved by the Secretary of State. About 990 schools have embarked on the process of opting out, and in March 1993, 337 were operating as autonomously incorporated institutions. Although the numbers are small, approximately 7% of all secondary schools, and 0.4% of primary schools in England have opted for GM status. The impact of the policy has been uneven. About a fifth of all LEAS have lost control of 20% or more of their secondary schools. In several other LEAs, however, no schools have yet opted out.

In a consultative White Paper, issued in 1992, prior to legislation currently before parliament, the government re-affirmed its commitment to improving quality , increasing diversity and choice, greater accountability and greater autonomy as the guiding principles of educational change and reform. As well as justifying the extension of GM schools policy, these themes have also informed the restructuring of local authorities, via the introduction of competitive tendering: the decentralization of health care provision through the establishment of trust hospitals and GP fundholders: and, changes in public sector management through the creation of public sector 'agencies' (see Stewart and Walsh, 1992).

These developments in public sector management have other elements in common. They are all based on presumed practices in the private sector. The changes are also aimed at creating distinctions between service 'providers' and 'purchasers'. It is further intended that competition between public sector institutions, and between public and private sector organizations will be introduced to create internal markets throughout the public sector.

The trend, therefore, has been to foster autonomous institutions, with devolved management structures, lightly administered from the centre, aimed to deliver gains in managerial efficiency, lower costs, and consumer pressure on public services. Additionally, the increasing number of autonomous institutions and agencies has been accompanied by an important shift in the relationship between policy formulation and its implementation and, a change in the principles of regulation. Ministerially-appointed, non-elected funding and regulatory bodies will incrementally replace locally elected, professionally orientated authorities to oversee the management of local government, schools and hospitals (Cordingley and Kogan, 1992). The growth of the 'new magistracy' (Stewart, 1992) can be interpreted as signalling the abolition of local, democratic forms of accountability, and their replacement by bodies

accountable to, and steered at a distance from, the centre.

Current policies thus denote a widely dispersed tendency to favour 'market' answers to fundamental dilemmas of resource allocation in traditionally non-market areas of state-production. This raises questions about the applicability of private sector models in the management of public sector institutions that were previously motivated by principles of accountability to an elected body, equity, and service to citizens. There are also questions which concern the kinds of markets that can be established in a sector which remains regulated, although increasingly at a distance, by central government.

As the relationship between service providers and purchasers and the new regulatory bodies is as yet unfolding, or, in respect of education, remains to be established fully, it is too early to address the questions they raise empirically. In the case of grant-maintained schools however, these have been in operation for over three years. Although few in number, it is possible to reflect on the extent to which they have contributed to the creation of educational markets in local contexts. This paper, therefore, will focus on GM schools policy, its contribution to choice and diversity of education, and, in two selected areas, explore the perceptions of the opportunities it offers to pupils and their parents. Part 1 considers the extent to which GM status has affected parental and pupil choice of school and subsequent experience in terms of comparisons both before and after incorporation and between different school sectors. Part 2 explores the impact of opting out on two education 'micro-markets' and considers the possible implications of an expanding GM sector.

1. CHOOSING AND USING GM SCHOOLS: PARENTS' AND PUPILS' ACCOUNTS

It could be argued that all research into the effects of education policy should incorporate the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries. With a 'consumer driven' policy such as opting out, their perspectives are crucial, not only for evaluating the 'success' of the policy in terms of its objectives, but also for predicting its future impact. Parents not only initiate the opting out process, they are also the only constituents that take part in the ballot which follows. Furthermore, through their choices, parents are ultimately able to determine the 'success' or 'failure' of individual institutions.

To this end, and as part of a larger study of opting out (Halpin & Fitz 1990; Fitz, Power & Halpin 1993 forthcoming), we interviewed pupils and parents that use eight GM schools (selected to represent the diversity of the sector as a whole; rural and urban, inner-city and suburban, comprehensive and academically selective, single-sex and co-educational) and those using neighbouring LEA and independent schools in two selected areas (Table I).

TABLE I
Number of pupil and parents interviewed

	Schools	Pupils	Households	Parents
GM	8	264	106	129
LEA	4	124	56	65
Independent	2	72	20	22
Total	14	460	182	216

For comparative purposes, pupils and parents that use GM, LEA and independent schools were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Indeed, in an effort to achieve continuity across projects, a similar schedule has also been used on two other ESRC funded research studies evaluating, respectively, the Assisted Places Scheme (Edwards, Fitz & Whitty 1989) and the CTC Initiative (Whitty, Gewirtz & Edwards 1993 forthcoming).

The pupil interviews were all conducted on school premises and took approximately twenty minutes. At each school, we sought to interview forty pupils that were randomly selected from years 7, 8 and 9. As well as asking pupils about their aspirations, family background and interests, we enquired about the basis of their choice of secondary school and their perceptions of other schools. In the eight GM schools within which we interviewed, we were particularly concerned to gather data on any changes that pupils had noticed since incorporation, their awareness and interpretation of 'grant-maintained' status, and the extent to which opting out had altered their experience of schooling. On the basis of their responses we were able to identify two areas which could be said to constitute 'micro' education markets (Ball 1992). Within each area, research was then conducted in those schools that appeared to be in 'competition' with the focus GM school. In both areas, the principal 'contenders' comprised two LEA comprehensives and one independent school.

We interviewed about one half of these pupils' parents. These interviews took place in the respondent's own home and usually lasted one hour. The schedule included a wide range of questions covering the particular choice of secondary school, general opinions of education and background information concerning occupation, education and domestic arrangements. With parents choosing a GM school after incorporation, we wanted to find out whether the school's new status had influenced their decision. Parents who had chosen the school before incorporation were asked how they voted in the ballot, and about any changes in their sense of 'ownership' and involvement since the school

had opted out.

It is always difficult to ascertain the representativeness of one's sample. As both sets of interviews required parental permission and accessibility, the samples are to some extent 'opportunistic' and thus likely to suffer from distortion. With the pupils, informal impressions from teaching staff involved in the selection procedure indicate that a sample representative of the school population had been obtained. In the case of the parental interviews, however, the sample is skewed towards an overrepresentation of Service and Intermediate class households (Hope-Goldthorpe classification, Goldthorpe & Hope, 1974). Despite such limitations, a wealth of data were gathered which we have used to evaluate the early impact of GM schools on parental and pupil perceptions of GM status.

In the analysis which follows, we will employ Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz's (1992) distinction between parents (and pupils) as 'choosers' and parents (and pupils) as 'users'. Although such categories are by no means mutually exclusive, they highlight the important difference between selecting a school and the subsequent experience of that school.

Grant-maintained schools: pupils and parents as choosers

Advocates of the policy frequently cite the number of favourable ballots and augmented subscription at GM schools as evidence of parental popularity. Figures recently released by the Grant-Maintained Schools Centre (GMSC 1992), for instance, report that 88% of GM secondary schools have increased their rolls since opting out, with an average increase of 4.0%. While not disputing that individual GM schools are successful in terms of pupil recruitment, our research does not indicate that they are 'successful' in terms of diversifying provision and extending parental choice, either in particular areas or generally.

Accordingly, in this section we consider the extent to which GM status is a factor in school choice, report on changes in the frequency of 'first choice' realization, and evaluate whether GM schools are perceived as providing a new alternative.

Parents who had selected a school after it had opted out (51/129) were asked whether the school's new status had been a factor in their choice. Only eight of these respondents felt that it had any bearing on their choice of school. Even here, the significance of 'going GM' was not usually perceived in terms of providing a 'new' choice, but of holding on to an 'old' one. As one parent put it: 'It was not important as such; what was important was that they would be kept open'.

We have argued elsewhere (Halpin, Fitz & Power 1993) that, for many schools, and for far more than official statistics suggest, the opting out process was initiated in response to LEA plans for reorganization. For these schools, 'going GM' guaranteed, at least in the short term, a secure future. Indeed, this increased security might be one factor behind the improved rolls mentioned earlier. In other words, to the extent that recruitment is often adversely affected by plans for redesignation or closure, the security that GM status brings may well reassure prospective parents.

A few parents did make reference to aspects of GM status beyond increased security as being relevant to their choice. One parent, for instance, felt that its novelty was significant: 'It was a plus, because it was new, they would be hot on the school'. Another felt that it must indicate a forward-looking approach: 'It shows a go-ahead attitude, although I don't know a lot about it'.

But for all those who saw the school's new status as a bonus factor, there were as many who claimed to have selected a GM school <u>despite</u> it having opted out. They were either apprehensive about the ability of the school to 'go it alone' or concerned about its isolation. For example: 'My husband didn't want him [her son] to go - not because of the GM bit, but because of the LEA's attitude, like how not playing football with the other schools would affect the kids.'

Either way, the reasons why most parents choose schools that are GM seem to be little different from those that underlie the choice of any school. Indeed, our data indicate that school selection tends to be grounded not on official designation, but on unofficial reputation gleaned from informal accounts.

This holds true for all categories of school in which we interviewed, despite the higher public profile of many of the GM schools in our sample. While most GM parents, like their LEA counterparts, went to open evenings and/or days and studied school prospectuses, one quarter of our sample felt that it was the informal accounts which were the most useful in helping them reach a decision. Furthermore, nearly 70% of parents felt that the 'official' image presented at events organized by the school simply endorsed what they already knew through the local 'grapevine'.

The importance of family and friendship connections as a key factor in choosing a secondary school was also a noticeable feature of all the schools we researched. Specifically, in 60% of cases, pupils report that the attendance of family members or friends was a key aspect in their selection of a school. Parents' responses endorse this. After the child's wishes, other parents and relatives were the most frequently cited influence.

Given that the GM schools in our sample were incorporated for a only few terms, most of the informal accounts and family/friend connections must stem from <u>pre</u>-GM status. Accordingly, the local confidence expressed through the popularity of a GM school appears to be founded less on the school's new status, but rather more on the preservation and continuity of its recent past.

The extent to which such popularity is strengthened through GM status can be evaluated through comparison of 'first choice' incidence. Were GM schools mentioned as the 'first choice' by those that use them more often than their LEA counterparts? And if so, to what extent can such a difference be accounted for in terms of the change in governance?

Ninety percent of our entire sample of parents claim that they were successful in obtaining a place at the school of their first choice. There are, however, notable variations within the sample. All of our independent parents say they achieved a place at the school of the choice, as did 93% of GM parents, whereas this is the case for only 79% of LEA parents. In other words,

over one fifth of the parents we interviewed who were using LEA schools would have initially preferred their child to be at a different school. Such figures might indicate that GM schools are perceived as more desirable than their LEA counterparts. Such a conclusion, however, is hard to sustain because of the marked variations within each sector. While the average first choice incidence is higher within the GM sector, individual LEA schools score both higher and lower. And even where 'first choice' incidence is higher in a school that has opted out, such popularity is not clearly connected with GM status. Comparison of 'first choice' incidence before and after incorporation reveals a drop in frequency across both state sectors (Table II).

Table II
First choice realization across sectors

	First choice realization	
	Pre-GM (N=75)	Post-GM (N=107)
GM schools	95%	92%
LEA schools	88%	75%
Independent schools	100%	100%

Ninety-five percent of parents who selected a GM school prior to incorporation claim it was their 'first choice', compared to 92% subsequently. While this is a less marked drop than reported by parents using LEA schools (88% to 75%), there is little indication of any change in the relative positions of schools in terms of perceived desirability. Indeed, the frequency with which first choices are attained by our sample as a whole declined from 93% to 87% since the introduction of GM status. Although no simple causal explanation should be inferred, such statistics make it difficult to uphold the claim that the GM schools policy is leading to a greater realization of choice.

In any event, the concept of 'choice' only has meaning if parents think there are feasible alternatives. When asked if they felt that they did have a choice, 66% of all parents responded positively. It is important to note, however, that one third felt that they did not. As with first choice incidence, most of those claiming not to have choice are parents using local authority schools. Thus, while only 26% of GM parents felt they had 'no choice', this was the case for 39% of LEA parents. Again, it would not be adequate to explain such a difference in terms of a school's opting out, inasmuch as for both the sample as a whole, and within particular sectors, there is little change in the perceived availability of 'choice' since GM status.

GM schools: parents and pupils as 'consumers'

While the above data provide little indication that GM status has had any significant impact on parental choice of school, it could still be argued that GM schools offer parents enhanced opportunities to influence the future of their schools over time, and thus to create choices not previously available. This is an important argument for it is sometimes used to combat the criticism that geographical constraints and the friction of distance inevitably impede and undermine parental choice (Ball 1990). In this sense, 'choice' is not conceived as operating between pre-existing alternatives, but rather in terms of 'consumers' being able to effect longitudinal choice within a single institution. As Kenneth Baker (1988), another former Education Secretary, once argued: 'We are offering choice in public service. We are offering choice to parents and governors who wish to exercise it to run their own schools'. It is in the light of this claim that we now explore whether GM schools are seen by their 'clients' to offer a different educational experience and greater participation.

There is certainly little doubt that the parents and pupils who we interviewed spoke favourably of their GM experience. Eighty-three per cent of the parents we interviewed say they are 'very satisfied' with the educational provision for their children. Similarly, nearly all the pupils we spoke to consider that their school is the 'best' in the area; but, then, so do their LEA and independent counterparts. Indeed, it was a feature of all the schools we visited that both pupils and parents feel warmly about the schools they or their children attend. Furthermore, comparison of levels of expressed satisfaction before and after opting out reveal little change. Thus, however strongly parents support the school in its attempt to 'go it alone', we found no evidence that they feel themselves to have been 'liberated' from a situation in which 'their children are imprisoned in schools, in some cases in systems, that are totally repugnant to them' (Cormack 1988).

Just as there is little difference between expressed satisfaction in a school, either since it opted out or between different kinds of school, neither is there any evidence to indicate that GM parents experience greater participation in the governance of their school. Although sixteen of the 55 parents we spoke to who had used the school prior to incorporation said they felt they had a greater sense of control since it opted out, overall reported levels of parental involvement vary little with school type. In fact, more parents from LEA schools (54%) claim to be involved with their child's schools than those using GM schools (44%). Neither are there any significant changes in the reported level of involvement subsequent to opting out. In other words, there seems to be no relationship between the status of the school and the degree of parental involvement.

Another indicator of parental interest can be explored through the extent to which parents are familiar with school governors. Again, GM status does not seem to have wrought any expansion of familiarity. For while 44% of parents with pre-GM entrants claim they know at least one of the governor's names, only 26% of post-GM parents did. The greater proportion of pre-GM familiarity might be explained in terms of the high profile of governors in the opt out ballot. However, the overall levels of

awareness (35%) are actually lower than that of their LEA counterparts, where 41% parents say they are familiar with one or more governors, either in person or by name.

Similarly, pupil accounts do not reveal any significant alteration in their experience of a school since it opted out, apart, that is, from increased resourcing and 'stricter' school rules. In all the GM schools in our sample, pupils highlight recent improvements to the fabric of their school and the purchase of new equipment. In many of the schools, they also report a tightening up of dress codes and greater enforcement of conventional codes of behaviour. Despite these observations, they give little indication that their school is different 'in kind', either to its previous status or to other local state-maintained schools. For most pupils, GM status is not perceived as marking a transformation, or even a transition. Indeed, in many GM schools, a significant number of them are unaware of any change in status. True, the degree of 'awareness' varies from school to school. Even so, nearly one quarter of all the GM pupils we interviewed had no knowledge of any change in the management or status of their school. When pupils stated that they were aware that their school had opted out, they were often unsure as to what this meant. There was certainly little indication that 'going GM' had altered their experience as pupils. More often, it was seen to be 'just a change of name', and 'only the letter headings are different'. As one other pupil put it: 'There's nothing special about being grant-maintained ... 'cos most of the kids and teachers are still here'.

In summary, early perceptions and experiences of the GM schools policy indicate that opting out has had little significant impact on the choices parents and pupils make about schools or their experience of state education. In one sense this is hardly surprising, given the constraints under which GM schools operate. Although the policy enables schools to 'break free of the local authority', it is an exaggeration to claim that this means these schools have been given 'full control of their own destinies' (Conservative Party 1992), and for two reasons in particular.

Firstly, GM schools are obliged to teach the National Curriculum (NC) alongside their LEA counterparts. They are therefore unable to devise curricula which might prove more attractive to parents than the present NC arrangements. And while GM schools are to be encouraged to develop 'specialized' curricula, and even select on aptitude a minority of their pupils (Blackburne 1992), there is no suggestion that they will be able to do so outside the prescribed framework of the NC.

Secondly, on incorporation, GM schools are obliged to preserve their 'character'. Indeed, this is a precondition of 'going GM'. Schools may apply for a subsequent change of character, but such changes must be argued for and are subject to the Secretary of State's approval. A recent questionnaire distributed by the GMSC (1992) reveals that most, in fact, have no such desires.

It is useful at this point to contrast the GM schools policy with another Government strategy aimed at diversifying educational provision, namely, the CTC initiative. If, as

Edwards, Gewirtz and Whitty (1992) argue, CTCs are 'obliged to be different', GM schools, it appears, are obliged to be the 'same'. And, although some would claim that protecting existing alternatives, in particular grammar schools, is an important dimension of choice, it does not constitute an expansion of choice. Thus far, then, it is only possible to argue that GM status represents preservation rather than innovation. In the next, and final section, we discuss the current, and possible future, impact of such preservation on the establishment of education 'micro-markets'.

2. OPTING OUT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EDUCATION MARKET

Having already argued that GM schools have not led either to an expansion of parental choice, or a new experience of schooling, it might be easily concluded that they have only a negligible impact on the education 'market'. Certainly, the experience of GM parents and pupils seem generally to differ little from their LEA counterparts. On the other hand, and as mentioned earlier, there are significant variations between schools and across sectors which warrant further discussion. Moreover, the articulation and realization of choice is always located in a specific locality. Accordingly, it is that context which we now investigate through drawing upon data derived from two selected study areas which we call 'Wellchester' and 'Milltown'.

Wellchester (population 87,000) and Milltown (38,000) are located in the South West of England. Although their size makes them unrepresentative, both of large urban areas and rural regions, the diverse number and type of school within them makes each a manageable case study of the way in which GM status can impact on local provision.

Wellchester schools

Bellevue, the focus school in Wellchester, was incorporated within the GM sector in the Summer term of 1990. A grammar school until reorganization in 1972, it now operates as an 11 to 18 boys' comprehensive. Out of the six maintained schools considered by our sample, two schools in particular were mentioned more often than others, namely Canford School, an 11-18 boys' comprehensive, and Trelawney School, an 11-18 co-educational comprehensive. Both schools were secondary moderns until the 1972 reorganization took effect. Wellchester also has a thriving independent sector. In fact, one quarter of the state school pupils we interviewed were aware that their parents had considered an independent school as an alternative. Of the independent sector, Queen Mary's, an 11-18 ex-direct grant boys' school which participates in the Assisted Places Scheme was the most frequently mentioned.

Milltown schools

Stoneford High and Merrick are the two GM schools in Milltown on

which we focused our research; they were both incorporated at the start of the 1990 academic year. Stoneford High remains an 11-18 girls' grammar school; and Merrick is the neighbouring 11-18 boys' grammar school. Both had retained selective admissions policies, despite successive LEA reorganization attempts. The GM schools policy enabled them, like many other grammar schools 'under threat', to preserve their selective status. Despite their official designation, the LEA had previously allocated children to the schools on the basis of proximity as well as test results. Since opting out, this has been abandoned. The two LEA schools which were mentioned most often by our GM pupil respondents are Arneside, an 11-18 co-educational comprehensive, and Midlane. Until 1990, Midlane was designated a co-educational 'secondary modern' school. Since then it has become 'comprehensive', though it has lost its sixth form provision. The independent sector serving Milltown comprises only one school, Woodcote, a co-educational school with both day and boarding provision. Like Queen Mary's, Woodcote offers Assisted Places.

In what follows, we explore the extent to which the patterns of choice already discussed are reflected in Milltown and Wellchester. We also examine whether opting out has altered the boundary between state and private schooling. We then assess whether opting out has had any impact on the social class compositions of schools in these localities and consider the future directions along which the reputations of the schools are being constructed. Finally, drawing on the findings of these two 'micro-markets', we discuss the implications of an expanding GM sector for the provision of education generally.

'First choice' schools

In Section 2, we reported that comparison of responses before and after opting out reveals a drop in the number of parents achieving a place at the school of their choice. This drop is highest for those parents using the LEA schools. This pattern is repeated in Milltown and Wellchester, although there are marked variations between the two areas, and between individual schools.

Amongst all the Wellchester respondents there was a slight decrease in the achievement of first choice school from 100% to 93%. This decrease is not uniformly spread, nor does it simply reflect sector differences (Table III).

Table III
First choice realization in Wellchester state schools

	First choice realization	
	Pre-GM (N=13)	Post-GM (N=27)
Bellevue (GM)	100%	90%
Trelawney (LEA)	100%	100%
Canford (LEA)	100%	71%

Trelawney has remained a 'first choice' school for all the parents to whom we spoke. And while Canford might appear to have declined in 'desirability', the actual numbers involved are small. Nor did the disappointed Canford parents select Bellevue as their first choice, for they initially requested Trelawney.

In Milltown, the pattern of first choice realization is somewhat different. Again, the number of parents reporting success in gaining a place at the school of their choice declined from 91% to 78%, but with more marked contrasts (Table IV).

Table IV
First choice realization in Milltown state schools

	First choice realization	
	Pre-GM (N=32)	Post-GM (N=34)
Stoneford High (GM)	100%	100%
Merrick (GM)	90%	100%
Arneside (LEA)	100%	85%
Midlane (LEA)	67%	40%

Here, the GM schools clearly have not seen the same drop in first choice admissions as their LEA counterparts. However, the relative positions of the schools remain unchanged since Merrick and Stoneford High opted out. Midlane, for instance, which, to some extent, was always a 'second choice', and even a 'third choice', school, still remains so. The degree of differentiation, however, appears to have increased. Given that both Stoneford High and Merrick are grammar schools which have strengthened their selective admissions procedures, it is more likely that the decline of first choice incidence stems, not from opting out in itself, but from the articulation between GM status and selective schooling. Nevertheless, not all the 'disappointed' LEA parents prefer the GM schools to others. While nearly 60% of them would have liked their children to go to the grammar schools, 38% selected another LEA school. Arneside was named as the first choice school by Midlane parents almost as frequently as Stoneford High or Merrick.

Either way, the most that one can say from such figures is that GM status consolidates existing patterns of first choice preference, particularly where it coincides with selective schooling, rather than alters relative positions either between

sectors or between individual schools.

Parental perceptions of choice have also been affected at Milltown. There is a marginal increase in the proportions of parents using the selective GM schools who claim they have a choice of school. Indeed, it is the Merrick and Stoneford High parents who, out of all the state schools we visited, are the most likely to say they have a choice of schools. There is, however, a corresponding decrease in the range of choices which the LEA parents perceive as available. Parents using Midlane and Arneside are more likely to say that they had 'no choice', both before, but particularly after, the two grammar schools opted out. Milltown parents who say they have no choice mention two main impediments. Some report that the 11+ equivalent deprives their child of entry to the school they want. Others feel that the mere existence of such testing denies them any choice. As one Arneside parent put it: 'I don't have a choice because I choose to send my children to a comprehensive. And because there's a grammar school next door, Arneside can't be comprehensive'. Again, it appears to be the connection between GM status and selective schooling which is the most significant variable. Paradoxically, then, it seems that a policy aimed at expanding parental choice is in fact impeding it in Milltown.

That GM status, by itself, does not alter perceptions of available choice is evident from our study of Wellchester. Here, there is little change in the number of parents claiming to have 'choice', either before or after Bellevue opted out.

State and private schooling

There is no indication, from either Milltown or Wellchester, that GM schools have been able to blur the boundary between state and private schooling. Although parents using the GM sector are likely to have considered independent alternatives more frequently than their LEA counterparts (36% as opposed to 16%), such a pattern is more likely to be explained by the conjuncture of GM and selective status rather than GM status itself. There is, for instance, no change in the proportion of parents looking to the independent sector before and after opting out.

Similarly, parents using independent schools are no more likely to consider a GM school. Although the number of independent parents interviewed is small, qualitative data on pupil perceptions suggest too that the gulf between 'state' and 'private' is as wide as ever.

Opting out and changes in recruitment

Critics of the GM schools policy often argue that it is not just the question of 'choice' that is at stake, but the way in which choice is socially distributed. They claim that, while there may be enhanced opportunities for some, they will be diminished for others. In this connection, the Chair of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities Education Committee, predicts that opting out would lead to 'a grab by middle class parents of their share of education at the expense of working class parents'

(Fletcher 1988). Similarly, Walford and Miller (1991) consider that increasing differences between schools will lead to a new hierarchy of institutions, 'with the private sector at the head, the CTCs and GMSs next, and the various locally managed LEA schools following'. There are also fears that this new ranking will reflect and reinforce existing patterns of socio-economic stratification (Edwards & Whitty 1992).

To what extent are such processes at work in our two micro-markets? Firstly, comparison of the occupations of parents (using the Hope-Goldthorpe classification, Goldthorpe & Hope 1974) reveals that there are differences in the social class composition of schools. In both areas, the two schools with the lowest first choice incidence, Canford and Midlane, are also those located in working class districts, and used mainly by parents with working class occupations. The occupational profile of parents using the GM schools, Bellevue, Stoneford High & Merrick, have a higher representation of Service and Intermediate classes. This should not, however, lead one to conclude that in our two areas GM schools are the dominant type of school for middle class parents. On the contrary, both Trelawney and Arneside, which are the two most 'popular' LEA schools in Wellchester and Milltown respectively, attract parents whose socio-economic status is as high, if not higher, than the neighbouring GM school.

With the exception of the independent schools, whose parents (particularly fathers) are drawn predominantly from the professional and managerial section of the Service class, there appears to be no inevitable correlation between the status of the school, whether LEA, GM, comprehensive or selective, and the social class composition of its pupils.

Indeed, there have been no significant shifts in intake since opting out. Some small changes are evident, however. The sample of parents whose children attend Merrick, the boys' GM grammar school, for example, shows a decrease in Service class households since opting out, despite the strengthening of its selection procedures. At Bellevue, on the other hand, there has been a slight increase in the Service class representation.

Whilst acknowledging both the weaknesses of our own sample and the limitations of using occupational categories as an indicator of social class (see, for example, Arber, Dale & Gilbert 1986), comparison of parents' occupation reveals that there has been little alteration in social composition either between sectors or between individual schools. Although there are marked variations between schools, these variations do not reflect sector differences, with the exception of independent sector parents. In Milltown and Wellchester, the neighbouring LEA schools appear to have social class composition profiles both lower and higher than the GM school. Nor do we have any indication of a change in the occupational location of parents using GM schools since they opted out.

GM schools and 'reputation management'

The degree to which schools are able to move 'upmarket' is likely to depend on the extent to which they can reformulate their unofficial reputations. For, as we argued earlier, official

designations and accounts of schools are less important than informal perceptions.

All state schools are now more conscious that the management of their local reputations is a central aspect of attracting parents. Certainly, schools seem to be more concerned than ever to 'market' themselves through the presentation of glossy prospectuses and open days/evenings. There is also a renewed emphasis on school uniform as an outward sign of 'good' discipline. Pupils in nearly all the state-maintained schools which we visited commented on recent changes in the upgrading of buildings and equipment and a reinforcement of school rules. This was particularly marked, however, in those schools which had opted out.

In every one of the GM schools, pupils made unprompted comment on improvements to decorative order and resourcing since incorporation. At Bellevue, for instance, pupils had noticed new science and sports equipment, new computers, new carpets, new lighting and general redecoration. All this was evidence, as one pupil put it, of 'lots more money'. Girls at Stoneford High made similar comments, referring to 'lots of decorating' and 'more money for facilities, new books and more PE equipment' as well as new buildings, such as a resource centre. Merrick had undergone similar refurbishment. Its pupils mentioned the addition of new technology and science blocks, as well as new equipment.

Although, as we discussed earlier, official school presentations usually confirm rather than alter parents' perceptions of the desirability of a school, the importance of impressions gained on initial visits to schools are still significant. The number of computers, in particular, of which all of the GM schools have substantially increased stocks, is frequently mentioned, reflecting Ball, Gewirtz and Bowe's (1992) impression that 'these machines clearly symbolize something important'. Improvements in resourcing and attention to decorative order are more than likely, then, to help foster positive impressions and augment school recruitment.

GM schools are also actively engaged in more subtle areas of 'reputation' management. Increasing emphasis is being placed on pupils' appearance and behaviour as indicators of 'good schooling'. These changes, while mainly cosmetic in character, are often writ large in the perceptions and experience of the pupils which they affect. Bellevue pupils made frequent reference to the tightening up of old rules and the introduction of new ones. Mention was made, for instance, of the attention being paid to discourage boys from leaving the top button of their shirt undone under their tie. With reference to 'manners', they were now to stand when teachers/visitors entered the classroom, and always use 'sir'/'miss' when speaking to staff. As one pupil said, 'they've come all heavy on politeness'.

These experiences are also echoed in Merrick and Stoneford High, where, for instance, pupils feel that, since the school had opted out, their appearance had come under increased scrutiny. The following is a typical comment: 'Recently they've clamped down on uniform, like no black socks or tights. It's grey everything'.

Pupil perceptions of opting out

The greater degree to which these changes are manifest may reflect the extent to which GM status, and the greater independence and better funding which it brings, enables schools to highlight their 'otherness' from neighbouring LEA schools. One way of monitoring this process is to examine pupils' perceptions of opting out, in particular, to explore whether this sense of 'otherness' is beginning to filter through into the local 'grapevine'.

There is evidence that the kind of superficial changes mentioned above are being transformed into more significant differences, both for those using GM schools, and for those in neighbouring LEA schools.

Although on the 'inside' of a GM school, the content of the curriculum and the composition of its pupils remain largely unchanged, its 'outside' relations are altered, a process which is likely to be exacerbated where opting out brings isolation from neighbouring LEA schools. At Bellevue, in particular, pupils indicate an awareness of becoming 'different' from other state schools:

> 'It does make it seem different. I don't know how, but when people speak about it, it just makes you feel different, though it hasn't really changed.'
>
> 'In conversation with people you feel really proud of the 'GM' title. As a pupil, though, I think nothing is really different.'
>
> 'In relation to other schools, it probably does make a difference, but inside, not much.'

The sense of 'difference' is also apparent in the responses of pupils that attend neighbouring LEA schools. Most of these pupils are unaware of their neighbour's new status, and therefore unable to define what 'GM' means. On the other hand, for those who were able to respond, GM status is connected with being 'different' from 'ordinary' schools. In Wellchester, for instance, there is an evident association between opting out and 'going private'. These varied comments from Canford pupils point up that, for them, Bellevue is no longer 'one of us':

> 'They're out of it - like if they want to buy something they have to use their own money instead of the council's.'
>
> 'They pay their own way. They don't get any funding from the Government.'
>
> 'It's when they don't want to be run by the Government and have things like the National Curriculum.'

The dimensions along which the differences between GM and 'ordinary' schools are constructed often magnify the particular characteristics of the nearby GM school. In Milltown, for

example, GM status is seen to be commensurate with single-sex, selective schooling, as well as private education. Arneside and Midlane pupils made the following comments about GM status:

'Grant-maintained means a school is single-sex, not mixed.'

'Grant-maintained means you've got to be brainy to go there.'

'It's something to do with opting out of the National Curriculum.'

'You have to pay money to go there.'

'It's when a school goes private.'

For these pupils, the designation 'GM' clearly denotes something other than 'ordinary' state education. As one pupil from Arneside put it: 'Grant-maintained means they don't do the things everybody else does'.

Interestingly, although pupils at independent schools are similarly confused over the precise characteristics of GM status, they were in no doubt that, whatever it stands for, it does not denote 'private'. Queen Mary's and Woodcote pupils say that 'opting out' means:

'It doesn't get any money from the Government. But it's not a private school.'

'They are a state school but they've opted out of the Government system.'

'It's opted out of Government and it's trying to cope on its own. But it stays a state school.'

Unlike their LEA counterparts, pupils at independent schools perceive of GM schools as being firmly located within the state sector and in no way akin to the kind of institutions they attend.

Summary

What, then, do the experiences of pupils and parents in Milltown and Wellchester reveal about the likely impact of an expanding GM sector on the provision of secondary education?

So far, there is not much to indicate that GM status, by itself, is having any significant impact on patterns of school choice. It marks neither a widening of choice, nor a highly desired alternative. There is evidence, however, that the conjuncture of GM status and selective schooling alters the ability of parents to obtain a place at the school of their choice. The experience of Milltown parents and pupils indicates that, with the exception of those both willing and able to secure a grammar school place, GM status has, on the whole, frustrated

the realization of choice.

Such effects, however, are likely to be fairly localized. There are no grounds to suggest that the GM policy is leading to the widespread return of a selective system of secondary education. Although of the first wave of GM schools operating in September 1989, nearly one half (47%) had selective admissions policies, this proportion has changed, and GM comprehensive schools now easily outnumber GM grammar schools. And while the GM secondary sector still contains a disproportionate number of grammar schools (22% as against 4% in the LEA sector), this is likely to diminish further as more schools opt out, and the available pool diminishes. After all, 30% of all state grammar schools are already incorporated within the GM sector.

On the other hand, it is possible that GM schools, both through their more vigorous reputation management and the associations they derive from the disproportionately 'traditional' composition of the sector, might be able to foster an image of themselves as the hallmark of 'good' state schooling. Such impressions are likely to be further endorsed through formal between sector comparisons. In his 1991 Annual Report, the Senior Chief Inspector, for instance, stated that standards in GM schools were 'rather higher than in the maintained sector as a whole' (DES 1992). As long as the GM sector is disproportionately comprised of schools with academically selective admissions policies, such comparisons must be misleading. Indeed, it would be surprising in these circumstances if GM schools' standards were not 'rather higher'. Such deceptive comparisons are also likely to be made from recently published examination results. Already, for example, the GMSC (1992) claims that 60% of GM schools achieved above the national average scores for their GCSE grades.

Even if GM schools do become perceived as 'beacons' of excellence (Baker 1989), it is still unclear what implications they will have on educational provision and the distribution of educational opportunities. Our evidence does not suggest that GM schools are likely to become the prevalent form of provision for middle class parents. In our 'micro-markets', for instance, the 'GM' emphasis on traditional imagery as the epitome of 'good' schooling is not universally sought after. Two LEA comprehensives, Trelawney and Arneside, market themselves along 'progressive' lines and appear to be retaining higher than average proportions of pupils from Service and Intermediate class households. It would seem therefore, that, in some cases, certain sections of the middle class retain an allegiance to particular forms and orientations of LEA-maintained comprehensive education.

Such qualifications should not be interpreted to suggest that GM schools will contribute to a diversity based on parity of esteem. Rather, they illustrate that patterns of choice are complex and situationally specific. While our data do not indicate that the worst fears of the GM schools policy's critics are being realized, neither do they suggest that their concerns should be disregarded. There is evidence that opting out preserves and pronounces existing differences between schools. Although the implications of a consolidation of differences are not easy to predict, the data we derived from pare[illegible] and pupils makes it hard to sustain the claims made by the policy's

advocates that GM schools will expand parental choice and alter pupils' and parents' experience of state education.

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